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# Private schools for free? Parents' reasons for choosing a new Free School for their child

## *Abstract*

This study examines parental choice preferences following the introduction of the Free Schools policy in England. We report on two phases of data collection: first, the analysis of factors that Free School and non-Free School parents reported as important in informing their choices; and, second, findings from semi-structured interviews with parents of children attending a Free School. The findings show that Free School parents' choices were mostly influenced by similar factors to parents elsewhere. There were, however, some notable exceptions, particularly in relation to school size, ethos and curriculum. Our analyses also highlight how the lack of information available led parents to use proxies to assess potential academic quality and school suitability for their child. We discuss the tensions that exist for parents in exercising choice within this new context and the implications for school intakes and diversity within the system.

*Key words: free schools, academies, parents, school choice*

## **1. Introduction**

The English Free Schools policy was introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010. It allowed the establishment of new autonomous schools, funded by the state but proposed, developed and run by external sponsors. The policy provides an important and new context for exploring issues of parental choice. As a new initiative, parents cannot base their decisions on typical sources of information used for school choice such as performance data and local reputation. The type and extent of information available to choose free schools contrasts markedly with that provided for parents' alternative available options: ostensibly, choosing a free school is risky and the decision cannot be based on proven academic standards.

What *are* school choice decisions based on in the context of these newly established schools? Do choice factors differ compared to those of parents choosing non-free schools and factors identified in the literature? And, if so, how? This study, through a survey of 346 free school and non-free school parents and 20 follow-up interviews with free school parents, reveals the underlying motivations and preferences of parental choice in this unique context. Parents', often contradictory, reasons for choosing Free Schools emphasised an interest in academic quality, social distinction and a motivation to avoid schools or social groups deemed to be less desirable. The results reveal tensions between parents' preferences and the policy aims and

narrative, and add to concerns about the potential impact of school choice initiatives on inequality and social segregation.

## **2. Free School Policy Origins and Development**

This section considers the introduction of the Free Schools policy, positioning it as one of the most recent market-oriented education reforms to have emerged in England. Over the last four decades, Conservative, Labour and coalition governments have introduced and extended opportunities for market mechanisms within education. These have included fostering competition, diversity and parental choice within the system, coupled with increased freedoms from local government control. Choice is often cited as a mechanism for increasing competition between schools and, as a result, a way of encouraging efficiency, innovation and improved standards. Advocates have argued that such policies can contribute towards improved standards at a school and system level while also empowering parents to choose the schools best-suited to their child's needs and interests.

A key element of choice policy includes the introduction of different school types to a system. The Free Schools policy is an extension of the academies programme and was modelled on similar reforms in both Sweden and America (Walford, 2014). The first City academies were introduced in England in 2000 by a Labour government. Designed as a school improvement policy tool (West, 2014), this reform was focused on 'turning around' failing schools in urban areas, improving outcomes for the children that attended them and giving parents in the area the choice of a 'good' school. Academy schools were given increased autonomy in relation to curriculum, admissions, budgets and staffing. The first academies opened in 2002 and the number steadily rose to 203 by May 2010 (DfE, 2013a). School sponsors at this point included individuals, faith groups, business and industry organisations and charitable groups. The policy evolved during this period, dropping the 'City' part of the name to reflect the fact that schools were opening in a range of geographical areas. The government also began promoting the idea of 'academy chains' (i.e. federations and trusts containing multiple academy schools) as a way of encouraging systemic school improvement and replacing some of the functions of the local authority.

In 2010 a Conservative-Liberal Democrat government took power and quickly committed to expanding the academies programme. The Conservative manifesto had put 'choice' at the heart of much of its discussion of public service reform (Conservative Party, 2010). The Academies

Act allowed existing schools to convert to academy status. More radical though was the Free Schools initiative which urged the introduction of new schools, set up and run by private stakeholders. This defining characteristic of Free Schools contributed to the wider ‘Big Society’ ideology and the government’s arguments for empowering local communities in the provision of public services. A key feature of the policy at the outset was the way in which parents were positioned as being potentially both consumers and producers of education. Advocates argued that these new schools would offer alternative choices for parents and children while also improving standards and helping the UK system to become more globally competitive (Gove, 2011). By September 2017, there were 387 Free Schools, representing a significant proportion of the total number of academies in England which at this point had risen to 6,540 (DfE, 2017).

### **3. Parents’ role in the school choice process**

The expansion of market reforms within education systems around the globe, and more specifically, the development of school choice policies, is predicated on a view that parents are able and well-placed to shape educational provision to meet the needs of their children (Conservative Party, 2010; DfES, 2005). Choice policies tend to be popular with parents (Coldron *et al.*, 2008) yet not all parents or children engage with them or benefit from them. Indeed, ‘choice’ is arguably a misnomer; instead, parents have the right to state preferences for schools but cannot guarantee that they will be allocated a place.

While standard market theory assumes that all parents will engage in the application and choice process with the aim of maximising their child’s outcomes by selecting the highest performing school, the prevailing evidence indicates that in reality, this is not always the case (Allen *et al.*, 2014). Instead, free choice is often circumscribed by geography, available resources and information, resulting in marked differences occurring between individuals and groups, and increasing the potential for social sorting between schools. Concerns have also been raised that the introduction of more diversity to the system with new school types will do little to reduce segregation across local school markets (Gorard, 2014).

Over the past two decades a number of studies have consistently highlighted the importance of academic performance in decisions about school choice (Burgess *et al.*, 2014; Harris and Larsen, 2015; West *et al.*, 1995). Gorard (1999) argues that the increase in quantifiable information about academic standards (such as performance data and inspection reports) makes

this a more straightforward indicator for comparisons across schools, and therefore is more likely to be used during the decision-making process. The studies above also show, however, that academic quality or performance is rarely the only feature influencing parents' choices.

Convenience or location factors have been shown to be important for parents choosing schools (Burgess *et al.*, 2006, 2014). Other factors such as school ethos, pupil safety, behaviour and extra-curricular have also been highlighted as important factors for some parents (Echols and Wilms, 1995; Harris and Larsen, 2015). One study suggested that parents understood these factors to influence their children's happiness, a key issue for them in choosing a secondary school (Coldron and Boulton, 1991). Work by Gewirtz *et al.* (1993) also introduced the concept of 'child-matching' a process where parents seek to select a school which they feel will 'fit' with the individual academic and social needs of their child.

Ball (2003) argues that for middle class parents, school quality and student composition are inextricably linked and that parents focused on maximising their child's chances of academic success look to their potential peer group as indicator of this outcome being achieved. His work, and that of others (West *et al.*, 1998; Green *et al.*, 2017) suggests that middle class parents who opted for private schooling were not only interested in having their children educated with others 'like them' but sometimes were also actively attempting to avoid those who were perceived as socially 'different'. Studies in this country and internationally suggest that this self-sorting based on socioeconomic status and/or other demographic characteristics is unlikely to be a phenomenon exclusively linked to the private sector (Bagley *et al.*, 1996; Bunar, 2008; Reay, 2004).

There is little evidence which explicitly links school *type* with parents' preferences. Where research has focused on parents' reasons for selecting particular school types (such as CTCs or private schools, or charter schools in America), the reasons for choosing them tend to be linked to the factors already described above, particularly academic qualities and potential peer groups (Gorard, 1997; Whitty *et al.*, 1993; Stein, 2009). A study by Burgess *et al.*, (2009) also suggests that for many families, types of school may be of little relevance when considering options due to constraints of location and proximity or income.

For the last three decades in England increased information has been made publicly available in order to support parents with choosing schools for their children. While more parents do

now refer to inspection reports and performance data to inform their choices (Coldron et al., 2008), evidence suggests that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to use this type of information (Francis and Hutchings, 2013; West and Pennell, 1999). There are also clear limits to the ability of published data to capture and convey a comprehensive and up-to-date account of school performance to parents (Allen and Burgess, 2011; Leckie and Goldstein, 2009; Perry, 2016). Moreover, informal or ‘hot’ knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) obtained via social networks and ‘word of mouth’ continues to be an important factor in motivating preferences. Work by Schneider et al. (1999) also highlighted the power of visual cues (such as the appearance of a school) in influencing choices and predicting future academic performance.

#### **4. Methods**

The data presented within this article were collected as part of a larger examination of school choice in England (Morris, 2016). Data collection for this phase took place in 2013-2014, a period when the Free Schools initiative was still very much at a formative stage, and when information regarding the opening of new schools was not always easily available or reliable. This had considerable implications for gaining participants, particularly for the first phase of this study, consisting of a parent questionnaire exploring reasons for school choice and experiences of the admissions process. At the time of collecting the data there were 92 secondary-age Free Schools open in England; the first schools had opened in 2011 and so none of them had GCSE examination data at this point. All were approached to disseminate the questionnaires to parents of Year 7 (age 11-12) children with a total of 14 schools agreeing to participate. Questionnaires were returned directly to the researchers in stamped addressed envelopes, and therefore responses were not seen by school staff.

The schools being able to operate as ‘gatekeepers’ is a clear limitation of this aspect of the study. By choosing not to participate and distribute questionnaires, a significant number of parents were not made aware of the project and were prevented from contributing. The head teacher’s decision about whether to be involved will be influenced by numerous factors, many of which are likely to be associated with the characteristics and circumstances of the Free School and the basis for parents’ school choice decisions. Issues of time, resources and staffing were given as reasons for non-participation, and one head commented on the fact that she could not risk negative responses from parents so early in the school’s life.

In developing a comparison group of non-Free School parents we initially planned to recruit the geographically closest secondary school to the Free School. However, it quickly became apparent that many of these were not able or willing to participate and so the search area was widened. As a solution, non-Free Schools located in a local authority with a Free School were approached to distribute the same questionnaire to parents of Year 7 children; nine schools agreed to be involved and these formed the ‘non-Free School’ comparator group. While these schools are not a perfectly matched comparison group in terms of them necessarily being alternative options for local parents, the responses from participants here do allow us to make interesting and valuable initial comparisons about the kinds of factors that affected the choice of a new schools versus that of an established one with a clearer record of performance, using the same research instrument. Altogether 346 questionnaires were received from parents – 135 from Free School parents and 211 from non-Free School parents.

The first part of the questionnaire asked parents to report which factors or features they felt were important in influencing their choice of school. This kind of criteria-based questionnaire, where parents rate and report factors or features that they perceive to be important in influencing their choice, has been used widely within the school choice literature. This criterion approach does not necessarily capture the full picture of parents’ decision-making (Bowe *et al.*, 1994), it does however provide a useful insight in to some of the key aspects that parents reported as being attractive (or otherwise) to them. The list of potential factors featured in the questionnaire was informed by the literature and relevant examples that had been used in other studies (see e.g. Hammond and Dennison, 1995; Gorard, 1997; West et al., 1995). A small number of new items were introduced based on the more recent context and the rationale that had been presented by advocates of the Free Schools programme. An example of this is where parents were asked to consider whether ‘A new/different approach to education’ was a factor in their school choice decision.

As the questionnaire was administered after the allocation of school places, there was potential for an element of post-hoc rationalisation in parents’ responses. This is a familiar issue in much of the parent-focused school choice literature and one which warrants further study in relation to the more diverse schooling landscape that is being developed. The timing of the study precluded our preferred approach of examining parents’ views of a local Free School choice prior to them engaging with the secondary school admissions process (i.e. while children were in Year 6) and then following up after school allocation.

The second phase of data collection within this study involved 20 semi-structured telephone interviews with parents of Year 7 children attending a Free School. In total, parents from nine different Free Schools participated in the interview phase. The interviews were conducted with parents who had previously completed the questionnaire and had volunteered to share their experiences in more detail. Of the parents who agreed to be interviewed, most (19/20) were mothers. Geographically, they were located across England, and were based in a range of rural, suburban and urban areas. Other demographic details, as provided through the questionnaire, are referred to where relevant, in the findings section. A list of interview participants and their characteristics is included as an appendix.

The method of recruiting interview participants via the questionnaire meant that respondents were self-selected and unlikely to be representative of Free School parents as a whole. Participating parents may have been particularly connected to their desire to want to share either positive or negative experiences of the choice process and attitudes towards their child's school, or justify their choice of a new school. It is unclear how this selection bias for Free School parents differs from their counterparts from non-Free Schools and whether different factors are at play. Therefore, the sample is likely to represent a significant strand of parental opinion in each context, even if not entirely representative of the entire parental body. Within the data sources, the questionnaire data were taken as being more representative of parents' views more generally; the interviews allowed illustration and greater exploration of parents' experiences and the context of the decision-making process. They provided opportunities to examine the 'landscape of choice' (Bowe et al. 1994), a metaphor for conceptualising the interactions between individual choices and multi-layered social, political and geographical contexts within which choice occurs.

## **5. Results**

### *5.1 Questionnaire Data Overview*

Table 1 gives an overview of the responses to the questionnaire items on the importance of various factors in parents' school choices. On the right-hand side of the table we have added the difference between the responses for parents whose children do and do not attend Free Schools. We have also organised the results by the difference in importance between these groups; items near the top of the table are relatively more important for parents who did choose Free Schools compared to those who did not. The questionnaire data reveal clear indications



of which factors parents viewed as important (or otherwise), including some areas of difference between both groups of parents.

We also conducted a subgroup analysis by Free School wave. This was done with a view to examining whether there were any differences between parents choosing Free Schools in the first year of the policy (2011) compared with those schools that opened in subsequent years (2012 onwards). For the majority of factors, proportions of parent responses remained stable across the years. However, there were a small number of noteworthy differences for some factors. Both ‘ethnic mix’ and ‘Ofsted results’, appeared to be slightly less important for the later group of Free School parents while a ‘new/innovative approach’ was more important for those applying to the third wave of Free Schools. It might be that newer and innovative approaches were less feasible or prevalent in the opening years of the policy. However, we cannot determine whether these differences were driven by the characteristics, ethos and priorities of the specific make up of schools within each wave or stem from changes in parent priorities. These elements of the choice process are considered in further depth below.

For the remainder of the results section, we discuss these results within a mixed methods analysis, drawing on both the interview and questionnaire data to present the key findings in relation to what parents reported as important when choosing a Free School for their child. We focus on two reoccurring, and sometimes interlinked, main themes that emerged from the combined data sets: first, the desire for academic quality and second, the interest in a personalised and holistic approach to education.

Table 1 – Importance of school choice factors for parents who did and did not choose Free Schools.

	<b>Free School (FS) Parents (%) (n = 135)</b>			<b>Not Free School (NFS) Parents (%) (n = 211)</b>			<b>Difference between FS and NFS (%pt)</b>		
	Not important	Important	Very important	Not important	Important	Very important	Not important	Important	Very important
School and classroom size	9.6	29.4	61.0	24.3	51.4	24.3	-14.7	-22.0	36.7
Traditional ethos	5.1	33.8	61.0	28.6	37.1	34.3	-23.4	-3.3	26.7
New or innovative approach	36.0	33.8	30.1	76.2	16.2	7.6	-40.2	17.6	22.5
Disciplined ethos	2.2	16.2	81.6	11.4	29.0	59.5	-9.2	-12.9	22.1
Teaching quality	1.5	12.5	86.0	7.6	26.7	65.7	-6.1	-14.2	20.3
Extra-curricular provision	6.6	40.4	52.9	20.5	45.2	34.3	-13.9	-4.8	18.7
Ethos	5.9	17.6	76.5	11.0	30.0	59.0	-5.1	-12.4	17.4
Didn't like alternatives	19.9	40.4	39.7	37.6	36.7	25.7	-17.8	3.8	14.0
Safety	4.4	17.6	77.9	5.7	25.7	68.6	-1.3	-8.1	9.4
Overall quality judgement	2.9	16.2	80.9	5.2	22.4	72.4	-2.3	-6.2	8.5
Specialist curricular area	32.4	41.9	25.7	40.0	40.5	19.5	-7.6	1.4	6.2
Reputation	2.2	25.0	72.8	4.3	27.6	68.1	-2.1	-2.6	4.7
Ethnic mix	48.5	30.9	20.6	44.3	39.0	16.7	4.2	-8.2	3.9
Facilities	7.4	33.8	58.8	8.1	36.2	55.7	-0.7	-2.4	3.1
SEN provision	48.5	27.2	24.3	52.4	26.2	21.4	-3.9	1.0	2.8
Faith designation	63.2	22.1	14.7	60.5	21.9	17.6	2.8	0.2	-2.9
Children who go do well in future	19.1	27.9	52.9	12.4	31.0	56.7	6.7	-3.0	-3.7
Caring ethos	23.5	35.3	41.2	24.8	30.0	45.2	-1.2	5.3	-4.1
Likelihood of getting place	26.5	44.1	29.4	25.2	40.5	34.3	1.2	3.6	-4.9
Single sex designation	93.4	5.9	0.7	87.1	6.7	6.2	6.2	-0.8	-5.5
School is near	36.0	33.1	30.9	26.7	36.7	36.7	9.4	-3.6	-5.8
Ofsted result	23.5	38.2	38.2	13.8	41.9	44.3	9.7	-3.7	-6.1
Exam results	16.2	27.2	56.6	8.6	28.1	63.3	7.6	-0.9	-6.7
Transport/convenience/distance	38.2	30.9	30.9	33.8	28.1	38.1	4.4	2.8	-7.2
Sibling attends	62.5	17.6	19.9	46.2	20.0	33.8	16.3	-2.4	-14.0
Child's preference	11.8	50.0	38.2	10.5	32.9	56.7	1.3	17.1	-18.4
Friends attend	61.8	33.1	5.1	38.1	36.7	25.2	23.7	-3.6	-20.1

## 5.2 *School quality and social distinction*

The majority of parents reported that academic quality and/or performance was an important factor in their choice of school. Combining responses from both Free School and non-Free School parents, the factors ‘overall quality’ and ‘quality of teaching’ were rated ‘very important’ by 75.3% and 73.3% of parents, respectively. ‘Exam results’ and ‘overall reputation’ were also highly valued with 60.7% and 69.9% of all respondents indicating that these were ‘very important’. These figures suggest that perceptions of academic quality formed a central role in informing parents’ choice irrespective of whether parents eventually chose a Free School or not.

There are some interesting differences between the two groups of parents. For Free School parents, for example, the ‘quality of teaching’ factor was reported as ‘very important’ by 86.0% compared with 65.7% of non-Free School parents. In contrast, examination results were ‘very important’ for 56.6% of Free School parents and 63.3% of non-Free School parents.

Ofsted inspection grades/reports, which are intended to provide an independent overview of school quality, were reported as ‘very important’ by approximately four in ten parents from each group (38.2% of Free School parents and 44.3% of non-Free School parents). The proportion of Free School parents stating that Ofsted judgements were ‘not important’, 23.5%, was approximately double that of non-Free School parents (13.8%). These figures are perhaps reflective of the fact that there were not inspection reports available at the time for the Free Schools chosen by these parents. Although parents appear to have placed some value on the performance information such as inspection reports and examination data, the lack of this in relation to new Free Schools did not appear to have prevented these parents from applying: instead, other indicators of quality emerge and were used as proxies for academic quality.

These features were frequently associated with perceptions about the potential school intake and environment. Strategies of avoidance were at the forefront of many of the choices made by parents within our study. The questionnaire, for example, revealed that 80.1% of Free School parents reported that ‘not liking other schools’ was an ‘important’ or ‘very important’ motivator for them during the school choice process, compared with 60.4% of non-Free School parents.

These views were supported and extended by a number of Free School parents in the interviews. The avoidance of schools known (or perceived) to be academically poor or

mediocre was a persistent theme but also of importance was the avoidance of certain areas or groups of children.

*...the other schools which are in a town near to us, one's a Catholic school and one is an academy but they've both had quite bad Ofsted reports and it's a very different profile of students, it's more of a socially and financially deprived area that they're in and then that's the snob in me, if nothing else. I used to work in [town], as you know there's certain people you'll do your best to sort of delay your child engaging with...*

(Parent 14, School 6)

School location was significant for influencing the interpretation of quality of provision on offer. The notion of 'otherness' comes to the fore for some participants. Rather than just avoiding particular schools because of measured poor performance, there is also a desire to avoid certain groups of people too. A muddled distinction between school performance and student composition emerges - with parents, in some cases, understanding the two issues synonymously. For these parents, the choice of the Free School is described as a way of avoiding alternative schools which they perceived to possess negative qualities.

### 5.3 *Proxies for academic quality*

A number of interlinked features helped to form the perceptions of quality that parents reported in relation to the Free School. These included a combination of some or all of the following: the promotion of traditional values; an academic curriculum; a 'smart, traditional-style' school uniform; and well-managed behaviour and strict discipline. These proxies appear to have provided a picture of distinction and a clear point of contrast with other local schools, embedding an impression of quality despite a lack of existing reputation to support this.

In this study 61.0% of Free School parents compared with just 34.3% of non-Free School parents reported that a traditional approach to schooling was very important to them. Previous research in to private school choice and CTCs (Gorard, 1997; Whitty *et al.*, 1993) has suggested that some parents were attracted to these types of schools by their traditional ethos. These findings suggest a similar interest in relation to Free Schools. Parents' understanding of what exactly a traditional approach might entail was primarily linked to issues of discipline, uniform and curriculum. Further elaboration was given during some of the interviews in relation to a number of the Free Schools being discussed. Again, comparisons with other local schools often featured, and were used to justify the decisions and highlight the dissimilarities between them. Comments such as this, regarding the uniform and appearance of pupils were typical:

*[Free School] is a fairly no nonsense, old fashioned school, that it would be a hard hitting, going for academia kind of thing, that in [Local School], you know, you have your polo shirt, well they were going to have a collar and tie and blazer and we quite liked that they were going for, to be fairly academic and they were going to push the children and that they were going to be strict on discipline and quite rigorous and I like that approach.*

(Parent 13, School 5)

The polo shirt worn by students at the other school appeared to act as a symbol of underperformance and disadvantage. By contrast, the smart uniform and firm approach to discipline promised by the Free School were interpreted as indicative of the rigorous approach being offered. The blazer and tie seem to be suggestive of success and affluence, and perhaps reinforce the feeling of quality and exclusivity.

The desire for a positive working environment where children could succeed academically was a recurring theme for some parents. This was often referred to initially as ‘ethos’ but was then sometimes further defined in terms of behaviour and discipline. Unsurprisingly, the opportunity to potentially avoid or distance themselves from the negative behaviour of ‘other’ children was seen as an attractive option. In the questionnaire, ‘discipline’ was rated as ‘very important’ by 81.6% of Free School parents compared with 59.5% of non-Free School parents. This suggests some difference perhaps in the approach or ethos that the two groups were looking for or expecting when considering schools, and possibly in what was being vocalised by the schools that they were viewing.

*It's just like the whole ethos, it was kind of going back to basics for me, which was discipline, you know, like they don't take any messing around and I find these days, a lot of schools give more attention to naughty children, rather than the children that just get on with it but could do with some extra help.*

(Parent 3, School 3)

An interest in a ‘traditional’ or ‘back to basics’ curriculum was also reported by a number of parents as a ‘selling point’ of the Free Schools. This perhaps reflects some recent policy and discourse shifts in relation to subjects, qualifications and standards (DfE, 2010; Lupton and Thomson, 2015). An emphasis on rigour and the value of a core academic curriculum has underpinned much Conservative party education policy and has been viewed as a route to improving standards within schools. This message appears to have been reinforced by some of the Free Schools discussed in this study with many parents commenting favourably. Again,

comparisons with other local schools were made, with parents tending to favour the ‘less is more’ approach in relation to curriculum subjects on offer.

*They're quite a traditional school...they have a low offer I suppose of choice than the larger schools have and when I speak to other colleagues who go to a school in [Town], they get the opportunity to do Engineering and things like that, where my children haven't got that...*

(Parent 6, School 2)

The perceived status of a traditional curriculum and the academic (as opposed to vocational) qualifications on offer were viewed positively by this parent, both in terms of an indication of high academic standards at the school but also in relation to potential longer-term benefits, such as attendance at university. Schools' decisions to exclude certain practical or vocational subjects or qualifications were not perceived as a negative factor for the Free School parents in this study. The parent below, for example, described how the ‘different’ provision at the Free School contributed to a feeling of choice for some families. It is also perhaps possible to see how this provision may appear more attractive to some families than others, potentially acting as a sorting mechanism across schools.

*I've never called myself middle class before in my life, but I think that is what the rural, middle class parents are looking for.... Yeah, horses for courses, you know, maybe your child does want to get on a bus every day and go to a bigger school that has got a wider curriculum and whatever, that's fine, that's absolutely fine, I'm not judging that at all, but it's all about utilising what we've got here in the community...*

(Parent 5, School 2)

Interestingly, an emphasis on an academic curriculum and traditional values was often seen by the parents as the Free School offering something ‘new’ or innovative, therefore providing additional choice in the area. This is an interesting paradox and points towards another potential policy tension: one of the aims of the Free Schools initiative was to encourage curricular and pedagogical innovation, raising questions about the extent to which this might emerge within more traditional models. From the data here we also do not know the extent to which the reported ‘difference’ between the chosen Free School and other local schools was a reality, or was actually used as more of a marketing tool to act as a point of distinction and establish parents' interest.

#### 5.4 Comparisons with other school types

Where some parents had described negative choices away from other local state schools as a reason for choosing the Free School, some also drew positive comparisons with private or grammar schools, models that they perceived to be successful and desirable. This was an area that predominantly emerged from the interviews as there had been no prompt within the questionnaire. Despite this, a small number of Free School parents did reference private or grammar schools in the open section of the questionnaire which asked parents to comment on the most important factors that influenced their school choice:

*I wanted my son to have the best education possible. The Free School is the closest thing to a private education.*

*[The Free] School is modelled on grammar and private school educational system which is better than the average state school... Good sports facilities are an important factor and at [Free School] are almost on a par with the local preps.*

(comments from the open-response questionnaire item)

References to private or selective schooling were usually reported in very general terms, and tended to be based on stereotypical perceptions of what this *type* of schooling was like. Parents who felt that the Free School could be compared with private or grammar education tended to focus on a combination of issues linked to academic attainment and rigour, ethos and behaviour. There was little overt acknowledgement of the fact that an economically and/or socially advantaged intake (as one would expect to find in a private or grammar school) would also be desirable. However, the parent's comment below suggests that this may have been a consideration.

*...other secondary school children, more often than not, you're coming home from work, you see children walking around in their school uniform and it just looks bad. I've always been asking myself, do parents know where these children are, some of them are getting up to no good, so for me the idea that it will be a longer day at school appeals to me...another thing is I wanted [child] to go to grammar school actually, but she'd need her 11 plus...I really wanted her to have a high level of education.*

(Parent 1, School 1)

By contrast though, another parent choosing the same Free School found the lack of a selective admissions system and ethos appealing.

*The main reason was lack of choice, I think, initially. I was allocated a school for my child that was – I don't believe in selection, I didn't put my kids through 11 plus – and the comprehensive that I was allocated has a kind of covert selective system...then I decided to apply to a Free School, quite complicated, I think a lot of academies are wrong, I think the whole idea's wrong, but I was trying to do what's best for my child...I spoke to this woman who started it [the Free School], she's the deputy head and she's a really lovely, egalitarian, really lovely woman, and she said we're not going to stream, we're not going to set, you know, celebrating success and academic success and just not labelling children and not singling out clever kids, it was all lovely and that's why really.*

(Parent 4, School 1)

These two different perspectives give not only an interesting comparison of what parents were looking for in a school, but also of the different visions of education that that the same school was able to offer prior to opening. The Free School's lack of established reputation has perhaps helped to make this possible, allowing it to adopt a more flexible and personalised approach to promoting the school without parents being able to make additional judgements based on existing information.

### 5.5 *A personalised and holistic approach to education*

The desire for a high quality academic education seemed to motivate both groups of parents during the choice process. But it is also clear from the data that other, non-academic factors had some influence too. An interest in children being treated as individuals was a recurring theme in the open section of the questionnaire. The comments below are indicative of the views expressed:

*[Child] has learning and behaviour difficulties, and wanted a school that would be more than just Ofsted important.*

*Even though we advise our child on what we feel will be a good school to attend our child's choice was paramount as he has to attend the school for 8 years and his happiness is far more important than league tables (which are not a true reflection of a school anyway).*

*My child was bullied at her primary school so I wanted somewhere that catered for her as a quirky individual.*

(comments from the open-response questionnaire item)



The questionnaire data suggest some similarities and differences between parent groups in relation to the value placed on factors which form part of the theme of support and personalisation. ‘Care/pastoral support’, for example, was reported as important/very important by three quarters of both groups of parents (75.2% of Free School parents and 76.2% of non-Free School parents). School or class size, which parents often equate with both ‘better’ academic performance and improved opportunities for individualised learning and care was reported as ‘very important’ by 61.0% of Free School parents but just 24.3% of non-Free School parents.

This factor seemed particularly significant in initially gaining parents’ interest in the school; it was a clear and tangible way of marking the Free School out as ‘different’ and a strategy that they felt would be beneficial in supporting the individual needs and interests of their child. Parent 6, for example, felt that her chosen Free School offered a supportive environment for her child with special educational needs.

*The schools in the area were quite big, I think we had [School] and [School], so they were very large schools and we felt that with his literacy problem, we thought that he would be lost, forgotten. So, when we went to [Free School], we were very interested because they were talking about the class sizes being quite small and each of the children would be treated as individuals and their strengths would be identified quite quickly.*

(Parent 6, School 2)

The concern about children ‘getting lost’ in larger schools was voiced by several parents who cited that school size was important to them. This was linked to an interest in the amount of personalised support that their children would get and about the potential for them to ‘fit in’ socially too. These parents believed that it would be easier for their children to make friends and know others in their year group with smaller classes and a smaller intake.

Tied closely to the issue of a smaller school and a personalised approach to education was a desire by parents for children to be ‘known’ by their teachers. The perception of children being ‘just another child’ or even a ‘number’ (both terms used by participants) in larger schools was viewed as problematic. It appears that some of the schools also emphasised this issue, perhaps reinforcing and confirming the positive impression that these parents had.

*It was their [the teachers’] enthusiasm, they were just so passionate about the children and when we took [child] up there to their first meeting, they talked to him and not so much*

*to us. I really liked that, I thought, you know, yes it is all about him...it was like tell us what you're good at and not any other school spoke to him.*

(Parent 9, School 3)

*The head teacher made a point at one of the presentations that we want to say that every member of staff will know you, you know, they have an aim to know every child's name, every member of staff will know every child's name by half term and I believe that they do.*

(Parent 5, School 2)

The comments here have echoes of one of the original aims of the Free Schools initiative: to create more “smaller schools with smaller class sizes with teachers who know the children’s names” (The Conservative Party, 2010, p.51). Smaller schools and classes appeared to act as proxies for more supportive learning environments where a number of the parents felt that their children were more likely to thrive both academically and socially. It is also a feature with which other, established schools could not easily compete.

Many parents also reported valuing the extra-curricular activities offered by schools. Over half (52.9%) of Free School parents compared with 34.3% of non-Free School parents noted that enrichment and extra-curricular opportunities were ‘very important’ in influencing their decisions about schools. Parents felt that an engaging programme of extra-curricular activities could contribute to their child’s enjoyment of school, their physical and emotional wellbeing and the learning of non-academic skills that could be useful later in life.

*Every Friday they do a drop down day, so they take them out of the school environment and they take them to museums or they do some sort of like business enterprise with them. It's very much sort of like the whole round person as it were, rather than just focussing solely on academia the whole time.*

(Parent 2, School 1)

*There's so much, they can do something different each term, it can be sort of academic things, like they've been doing German, it can be things like student council, making a year book and then you've got like sports, hockey, cricket, football, it can be crafts...*

(Parent 20, School 9)

The parents commenting on enrichment and extra-curricular features were predominantly interested in activities that they felt would be academically, socially or culturally beneficial to their child. In addition, they reported wanting their children to enjoy themselves but within a

structured, safe and supervised environment. Formalising activities as part of the school timetable, particularly as part of an extended school day, proved to be popular too although it is also possible that this was linked to some of the issues related to convenience (discussed in more detail in Morris, 2016).

## **6. Discussion and concluding comments**

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons that parents reported for choosing a Free School for their child. Within this, we sought to explore whether this new choice context for some parents was associated with a shift in the kind of school features that are reported and valued. Our findings indicate that Free School parents expressed similar priorities for school choice as non-Free School parents, and that their preferences are largely in-line with previous literature in the field. There were however notable areas of difference, with parents' reasoning becoming more centred on issues such as school size, ethos, and whether the schools offered more 'traditional' approaches to education.

### *6.1 Judging Academic Quality*

Academic quality and school performance form a central focus for many parents in the decision-making process; this was the case for both Free School and non-Free School parents within this study. It is notable that they are so similar despite markedly different information availability: the newly-opened Free Schools had no 'hard' performance data or inspection reports available at the time when parents were selecting them for their children. Nor was there an established local reputation where parents could gain in-depth information about the school from their social networks. The strong preference for academic quality did not, in the case of Free School choices, translate into a demand for a demonstrable academic track record. Rather the Free School parents relied on 'proxies' for educational quality.

These included school environment and ethos, curriculum, school size and potential social mix. Many judged their child's individual potential for academic attainment based on social or non-academic issues. An example of this can be seen in some parents' interest in smaller schools. While this is an issue that has featured less within the school choice literature, when introducing the Free Schools policy, a focus on providing smaller schools did form part of the government's vision. Other proxies for academic quality appeared to reflect a broader government-endorsed interest in traditionalism, rigour in relation to curriculum and qualifications, and extended school days. The Free Schools, whilst only contributing to a part of this shift in policy and

practice, provide a new platform for its implementation. This is not necessarily problematic in itself although if it is being viewed as the ‘right’ or ‘best’ way, and supported as such by central government, then there is concern that it will further reinforce a hierarchy of status between schools. If so, other schools are likely to seek to align themselves to this approach, calling in to question how sustainable alternative or ‘diverse’ methods really are within a system which is driven by standardised assessment and accountability measures.

## 6.2 *Social Preferences and the Local Area*

In line with previous school choice research social mix was reported as a factor influencing the decision-making process, and was viewed as inextricably linked with academic quality (Ball, 2003; Benson *et al.*, 2014). As in the study by Bagley *et al.* (2001), reports of social mix as a factor were more likely to emerge via the interviews than through the questionnaire data. Closely intertwined with this were issues associated with the local schools market, the (perceived) success and performance of alternative schools, and the geographical locations in which schools were situated.

Since the introduction of the Free Schools programme there have been concerns that the new schools are more likely to attract more advantaged parents and have the potential to contribute to further social segregation between schools. The preferences of many parents for features which made Free Schools socially distinctive or for having an advantaged social intake lend support to these concerns. There is a danger that such impressions of social distinction contribute to a less inclusive school environment and lead to increased clustering of certain groups of children within different schools. Assessing these claims and concerns more fully is beyond the purview of the present study, although our data do suggest that this is an area that warrants further monitoring and research as the free schools programme unfolds.

## 6.3 *Support, Ethos and Wider Outcomes of Schooling*

Free School parents also foregrounded the distinction presented by the new schools in terms of the care and holistic approach to education on offer. We know from earlier work in the field that parents tend to be interested in features beyond just academic performance. The concept of ‘child-matching’ (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1993) is a useful way of understanding many of the parents’ responses within this study. While other schools were perceived as large, attainment-driven institutions with only limited opportunities for extra-curricular activities or personal development, a number of parents reported that their chosen Free School had been presented as a stark contrast to this. They felt that their child might be better supported and receive a

more personalised education within the Free School. As with the issues surrounding social mix, our data does not give us a clear understanding of how these perceptions emerged and the role of parents and schools in creating or developing them. Further research exploring the marketing of new schools within their local communities would provide valuable insights to some of the information issues which might be influencing decision-making and the impact of this on school intakes.

#### *6.4 Policy Aims and Parental Choice*

The findings here have a range of potential implications in relation to the Free Schools policy. Ostensibly, our findings suggest that two of the original aims of the Free Schools initiative – to provide additional choice to parents and diversity within the system – are, to some extent, being achieved. The Free School parents involved felt that the new school did provide an additional and usually positive option within the local schools market. Without further in-depth comparative work however, it is impossible to know just how ‘different’ or diverse the new schools really were (or were intending to be) in practice, or whether the reports of distinctiveness were exaggerated by parents seeking alternatives to their local schools and reinforced by schools’ marketing efforts as they sought to attract pupils.

Parents’ reported choices, while aligning with much of the previous school choice literature, have shifted within a new context, creating tensions between choices and how they are justified. Despite an ongoing emphasis on empowering parents to make ‘good’ choices based on academic quality through the provision of performance information, parents considering a new Free School are making a potentially ‘risky’ choice if they are to opt for a school without an established reputation and track record of performance. It is interesting, however, that for some of the parents in our study, the choice was not viewed as risky with the new school being perceived as a better alternative to other schools within the local area. Given the paucity of concrete data on which to base their decision, it is difficult to know the extent to which parents’ choices were formed by the schools themselves through their promotional material. The first few years of the school’s existence is a time when the school establishes itself within the local community and potentially develops a reputation based on other factors (such as intake, ethos and curriculum). Free schools have needed to work hard to position themselves and ‘sell’ their offer to prospective parents. The question remains therefore as to whether free schools are satisfying a demand or creating it.

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